

# PANDITA - RESEARCH REPORT ON CIVIC SPACE IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

Pandita ;

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A photograph of a busy street in Myanmar, characterized by a dense, chaotic network of overhead power lines and numerous satellite dishes mounted on the facades of multi-story buildings. The street is filled with people walking and vehicles, including trucks and cars, creating a sense of a crowded, bustling urban environment. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

# MYANMAR'S CIVIC SPACE SHRINKING OR CLOSING?

Uncovering Coping Mechanisms of  
Local Civil Society in Post-Coup Myanmar



## PHOTO CREDITS:

### *Cover photograph:*

A peaceful Yangon old town street, with electrical wiring all over the place on 18 March 2021. (Photo by Zuyet Awarmatik on Unsplash)

### *Photograph on Page 7:*

Soldiers stand guard along a blockaded road near Myanmar's Parliament in Naypyidaw on 2 February 2021. (Getty Images)

### *Photograph on Page 15:*

Night strikes with candles in Yangon on 12 March 2021. (Photo by Zinko Hein on Unsplash)

### *Photograph on Page 29:*

Anti-coup schoolteachers in their uniforms and traditional hats participate in a demonstration in Mandalay on 3 March 2021. (Associated Press)

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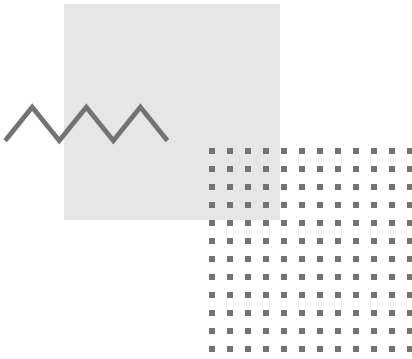
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## FORWARD

The coup d'état on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021 has severely halted Myanmar's fragile democratisation. The world saw how military rule had threatened all democratic institutions in Myanmar. All walks of life in Myanmar joined the peaceful civil resistance movements to make their voice heard.

Although the people express their determination peacefully, the military uses violent means to hold onto power. Amidst those challenging political circumstances, civil society plays a more crucial role than ever in defending the democratic institution and restoring democracy in Myanmar.

In this context, Pandita Development Institute (Pandita) aims to understand how civil society organisations (CSOs) respond to dynamic political changes and drawbacks. This intent contributes to a more significant question on whether civic space in Myanmar is shrinking or closing. With the active responses from a selection of local CSO leaders collectively, this study uncovers direct impacts and challenges, trends that have emerged, and the coping mechanisms in the civil society arena in post-coup Myanmar.

Via the key recommendations, Pandita believes that this study will build up follow-up discussions, considerations, and deliberations for the future of Myanmar's democracy and civic space.

Pandita wholeheartedly acknowledges the intense effort of independent local researchers who would instead remain anonymous for their security. Thanks are extended to dozens

of active local CSO leaders, as research participants, for the contribution of sharing their lesson-learned insights and critical decisions via online consultations.

Enormous appreciation is also extended to the international experts who participated in the online discussion events, voicing their precious inputs, and raising unique empirical questions.

Insightful oversight and guidance were provided by KIVU International Director Will Paxton and Advisor Becky Hatch. Thanks to financial assistance from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Ottawa, Canada, this study is possible.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Myanmar's civic space has shrunk. It has affected the everyday operations of civil society organisations (CSOs) and led many to develop new strategies for achieving change. This report is based on the insights of active CSO leaders.

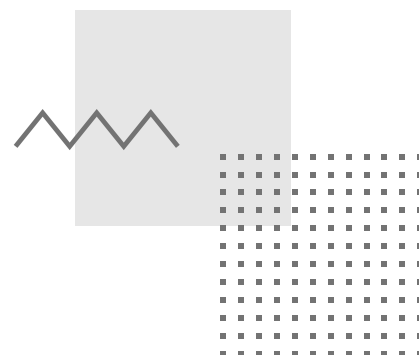
Through the lens of their experiences, this study uncovers the direct impacts they bear, and challenges unfold, trends that have emerged, and the coping mechanisms adopted in the civil society arena. Here are some key takeaways from this study.

### In terms of **IMMEDIATE IMPACTS**:

- Almost all operations and implementations by local CSOs have got to stand still for an unforeseeable future.
- The rule of law fails to safeguard the existence and operations of CSOs. Offices and staff members had to relocate for security reasons.
- The banking crisis disrupted the financial flows of local civil society when the military has launched investigations into the finances of some international and local CSOs.
- Local organisations have struggled to conduct donor relations urgently. They require a timely and clear response from donors or intermediary organisations about coordination to prevent pressures and conflict of interests.

Moreover, there discussed significant **POTENTIAL CHALLENGES** on the legal environment, operations and implementations, financial viability, stakeholder engagement, and accountability:

- Since the military junta single-handedly amends laws, limit freedoms, and commit human rights violations by justifying the state of emergency, staying recognised legally by the state becomes a dilemma for local CSOs. In the long term, they may face “State Harassment”.
- Local CSOs’ key activities to influence key decision-makers, raising public awareness, constituency mobilising, and public relations may face intimidation and scrutiny by local authorities. Some CSO leaders and key actors had fled to remote areas, neighbouring or third countries for security reasons, while activities and projects are suspended or postponed.
- Most local CSOs faced rigid funding resources, lacking contingency reserves or flexible expenditure when receiving international financial support. Adding to the fragile financial transfers, these challenges in accessing financial resources get more difficult within the current political instability.
- Although the role of independent advocacy organisations will continue to be vital, either in cooperation or stakeholder engagement, the CSOs face the dilemma in the medium-term or long term. While engaging in the military junta can seriously harm the organisational reputation, working openly with the National Unity Government (NUG) can jeopardise the organisation’s security.
- The backlash of democracy silenced debates on the civil society sector’s multiple dynamic accountabilities and produced challenges instead. The coup has undermined an excellent practice for accountability and transparency endeavoured by international partners and local CSOs.





### EMERGING TRENDS

Organisational strategy in many CSOs has become an issue to reconsider and realign for the current situations. Most organisations decided to work in low profile, sometimes in individual approaches, responding to emergency demands with available resources. There are a few visible trends local organisations consider:

- Policy advocacy to public awareness
- Revising stakeholders
- (More) Humanitarian than development
- Downsizing, relocation or less visibility

The study provided below some critical

**RECOMMENDATIONS** for international actors to sustain a space for civil society in Myanmar:

- A. Formulate comprehensive strategies for the changing times.
  - Consult with local civil society organisations.
  - Listen to CSO accountability advocates and political actors.
- B. Make flexible, long-term (and sufficient) financial supports available.
  - Support and coordinate responsively.
- C. Stand in solidarity with Myanmar's ongoing and now longer-term struggle for democracy.
  - Recognise the role of local actors.
  - Address local actor's capacity issues as needed.
  - Provide local partners with fair and equitable power and resources.

**Most importantly, the international community needs not only to focus on the coup's impacts – i.e., the humanitarian and socio-economic fallout. It is also essential to continue investing in organisational development and sustainability of local organisations, which are striving to deal with the root cause – i.e., the political situation.**



# INTRODUCTION

## CONTEXT

In the early morning of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021, the military trucks and tanks surrounded the Presidential House located in Myanmar's administrative capital, Naypyidaw.

They detained President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, along with other key cabinet members, members of the Union Election Commission, central bank authorities, well-known activists, and social influencers. As such, ten years of Myanmar's fragile democratisation came to an end.

The military headed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing staged the coup d'état rejecting the results of the 2020 General Election on the ground that there had been voter frauds. However, the 2020 General Election results were recognised as free and fair and *"representative of the will of the people of*



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*CSOs are being scrutinised on many fronts. The bank accounts of Open Society Foundation Myanmar have been seized, and the junta detained its staff.*

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*Myanmar*” by neutral international observers (Antiquerra, Buenaobra, Lun, & Vier, 2021). Soon after the coup, people from all walks of life joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Significantly, the civil servants from different ministries join the movement refusing to work for the illegitimate regime. Doctors, nurses, teachers, students, factory workers, housewives, and many more activists march together on the streets shouting, “*We Want Democracy*”, “*Give the power back to the people,*” and other slogans that showed strong discontents towards the military junta. The military, however, does not answer the call of the people and repeatedly uses violent means to attack innocent civilians who are peacefully expressing their democratic voices.

As of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2021, there have been 888 people killed by the military junta, including children and women. At least 5,173 people were arbitrarily arrested, charged, or sentenced without any legal basis (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2021). Due to the military coup, fundamental human rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of speech have been halted. Media freedom was reversed as the military junta targeted media outlets and journalists (Gomez & Aung, 2021). CSOs are being scrutinised on many fronts. The bank accounts of Open Society Foundation Myanmar have been seized, and the junta detained its staff (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was ordered by the local authority to suspend all activities in Dawei, the Southern region of Myanmar (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021).

Since the military junta restricts the freedom of association, many CSOs and their ongoing activities have come under constant military threats. Especially, the operations and activities of the rights-based and advocacy-oriented CSOs have been suspended for the unforeseeable future. Further, the coordination and networking activities of CSOs are being watched by local authorities, thereby making the project planning unpredictable.

The relations between international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local CSOs have been affected in

funding areas due to the banking crisis caused by the military coup. In other words, the civil society in Myanmar has been shrinking day by day, not only at the strategic level but also at the operational and implementation level. Against this background, this study aims to examine the impacts of the military coup on the CSOs, to assess the status of CSOs, especially the local CSOs that have been working on civic education and democracy promotion, and to understand the coping mechanisms of CSOs both in the medium and long term.

This study asks: *what are the impacts of the military coup on the CSOs working on civic engagements and democracy promotion in Myanmar? What are the coping mechanisms—both medium and long term—of the CSOs to continue their works?*

## RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The military coup in Myanmar halted the fragile democratisation process of the country and severely harmed the growing civil society in Myanmar.

Although the 2008 Constitution guarantees the freedom of association if it does not conflict with existing laws (Myanmar, 2008, p. 150), those fundamental rights can be suspended by the sole decision of Commander-in-Chief since the legislative, executive, and judicial powers are transferred to the Commander-in-Chief at the time of national emergency (Myanmar, 2008, p. 168).

In this current context, the active citizens and CSOs' role become more important than ever before to defend the democratic norms and practices in Myanmar. While the power in three government branches fell in the hand of Commander-in-Chief of the



Figure 1: Members of the Myanmar Photographers Association hold up their cameras as they call for Suu Kyi's release on February 13. Nyein Chan Naing/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Army (Tatmadaw), the civil society remains a space in which democratic resilience can be built both in the medium and long term, thereby supporting the efforts to restore democracy in Myanmar. Otherwise, the democratisation in Myanmar can become unfixable.

For such reasons, it is vital to assess how active citizens and CSOs are coping with the current situation in Myanmar. Exchanging views and sharing experiences of the actors from the civic spaces vis-à-vis the current situation will help formulate a medium-term or a long-term strategy to restore democracy in Myanmar.

## APPROACH AND METHODS

From mapping actors to the analysis of the findings, this study has taken the approaches and methods as mentioned below carefully.

**Actor Mapping:** To pinpoint the most relevant respondents, the researchers conducted the actor mapping exercise. By doing the actor mapping exercise, the potential research participants from the CSOs who work in civic participation at the local level were identified.

**Recruitment of research participants:** The purposive sampling method was employed to recruit the research participants. The target population for this research contains the members of the CSOs, especially promoting democracy and democratic governance through advocacy means. In order to make the data as representative as possible, the researchers developed such criteria as age, gender, location of the organisation, and length of years committed to civic participation issues. Against these criteria, the research participants were recruited via email, phone, or messages.

**Key Informant Interviews** were conducted via the online platform, especially Zoom meetings and phone calls. Briefly introducing the study, describing its purpose and context, was sent to each participant before the interview. Given the political sensitivity of the discussions, the participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any time if and when they feel uncomfortable sharing the information. The

semi-structured questionnaires and interview guide were prepared to elicit the enriching data from the participants. In recording the Zoom meetings, the participants were requested to provide verbal consent before the recording starts. Through these KIIs, Pandita collected insights from the key stakeholders regarding how they will cope with the changing political circumstances and the potential challenges they may face in the medium term, especially in civic education and democracy promotion activities.

**Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** were also conducted to understand how the CSOs are coping with the challenges of the changing political circumstances in Myanmar in the medium time. These discussions have become the platforms in which key actors from CSOs can share their experiences, insights, and strategies for medium and long term in responding to the changing political situations in Myanmar. During the KIIs and FGDs, Pandita team took notes on the discussion points and facilitated the conversation flows.

**Thematic data analysis:** Braun and Clarke suggested that thematic analysis can be used to identify, organise, and offer insight systematically into themes across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Further, a thematic analysis tool is used to understand the collective or shared meanings and experiences. Based on this notion, the thematic data analysis method was employed to reveal CSOs stakeholders' shared experiences and reflections. At the same time, the critical data which are different from commonalities were also categorised as unique experiences of the participants.

For the effective use of thematic analysis, the data are categorised according to themes consistent with the purpose of the study, that is, identifying ways to empower civic engagements to build democratic resilience under the military regime. Drawing from the respondents' answers during the KIIs and FGDs, the data are categorised into 1) immediate impacts, 2) challenges, 3) medium- and long-term strategies, 4) emerging trends, and 5) recommendations. Moreover, the changing context of Myanmar's political landscape was taken into account during the analysis since the respondents reflected on the political circumstances in Myanmar to a large

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*The changing context of Myanmar's political landscape was taken into account during the analysis since the respondents reflected on the political circumstances in Myanmar to a large extent.*

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extent. At the same time, they shared about the mid-term and long-term strategies both at the individual and institutional levels.

***Ethical Consideration:*** Preserving the integrity of the study and protecting the respondents' privacy, the research team treated the interviews with great caution. The data obtained from the respondents are treated with strict confidentiality and would not be used for other purposes. All recorded and stored data would be deleted at the paper's release.

In some cases where the respondents were not comfortable recording the interview, the interview would not be recorded, but only careful and case-sensitive written notes are taken. The interview participants were informed in advance that they could stop the interview at any point if they feel uncomfortable and that the data will be treated with strict confidentiality and used only for this paper. Verbal consent was requested before recording the interviews.

## CONCEPTUAL APPROACH OF THE STUDY: Democratic Resilience and Civil Society Empowerment

The fragile democratisation process of Myanmar was severely harmed, and Myanmar is facing the potential failed-state scenario after the coup of 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021.

Observers of Myanmar warned that Myanmar stands on the brink of state failure and collapse (Faulder, Robinson, & Macan-Markar, 2021). The military coup unleashed violence across Myanmar while the soldiers strong-armed the civilian population. UNHCR expressed its deep concern about escalating violence, deteriorating security conditions, and human suffering caused by the displacement (UNHCR, 2021). United Nations office in Myanmar stated that over 100,000 people had been displaced due to the security forces' attacks (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

On the economic front, Myanmar was severely hit by the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the growth rate sharply fell to 1.7 per cent in the fiscal year 2019/2020, halting the efforts on poverty reduction (World Bank, 2020). The military coup further fuelled this economic downturn. According to the latest UNDP report, COVID-19, and the military coup push half of Myanmar's population under the poverty line (Reed, 2021). By early 2022, about 25 million people will be living under poverty line, warned by UNDP report (UNDP, 2021). In a nutshell, the whole political economy of Myanmar and Myanmar as a polity is destabilising from its very foundation.

These alarming circumstances fundamentally threaten the emerging democratic institutions, albeit with undemocratic arrangements under the 2008 Constitution, within the past decade. CSOs are not exempted from these effects either.

The CSOs in Myanmar are experiencing the destabilising effects of Myanmar's shaky political economy. While the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar became an alarming issue for the international community and regional bodies such as ASEAN, it must not overshadow the importance of building democratic resilience in Myanmar because it serves as a shield to defend the totalising of military rule in Myanmar.

Will Myanmar cope with, survive, and recover from the current political and socio-economic turmoil? It depends on how much resilience Myanmar as a society can excel in facing these circumstances. Sisk made two propositions: *"value resilience"* and *"demand resilience"* while explaining the conceptual approach of democratic resilience (International IDEA, 2017). Both of which plays a vital role in reclaiming democracy in Myanmar.

Observers further suggested that a strong civil society is critical to



Figure 2: Karen refugees flee to Mae Hong Son, Thailand on April 29, following continued attacks by the Myanmar military (Karen Women's Organisation)

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*The “politics of the daily”, must be empowered and encouraged so that the civil society and grassroots in Myanmar can survive and even contribute to the restoration of democracy in Myanmar.*

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democratic resilience since it protects “democracy through investigation, information transparency, and advocacy that contributes resilience” (International IDEA, 2017, p. 7). From this perspective, it is crucial to empower the CSOs by creating an enabling environment to defend democracy in Myanmar. However, the question remains: how can civil society be empowered, and what are the context-specific strategies to empower civil society in Myanmar?

There were groups back in the early 2000s (a.k.a. “Third Force”) who self-proclaimed to serve as “neutral” mediators between the military regime then and the political opposition (NLD). Their approach was proven unsuccessful since the 2008 Constitution, drafted, and ratified by the military, had shown not much tolerance in political and economic freedoms.

The new landscape of social movement is emerging during the Spring Revolution. This landscape does not stick with one dominant leader, whether a strong military man or democratic leader, but it comes from the community-led initiatives. These community-led initiatives were derived from the elected members of parliaments, student leaders, factory workers, civil servants, social service providers and any ordinary citizen who do not want to live under the oppressive military regime (Myat, 2021).

In Elliott Prasse-Freeman’s words, the “politics of the daily”, as suggested in *“Power, Civil Society, and an Inchoate Politics of the Daily in Burma/Myanmar”*, must be empowered and encouraged so that the civil society and grassroots in Myanmar can survive and even contribute to the restoration of democracy in Myanmar (Prasse-Freeman, 2012). This notion is relevant to the study’s findings, which will be presented in the next section.



## FINDINGS

The findings from KII and FGD in this study are categorised into two thematic themes: 1) immediate impacts, 2) potential challenges, and 3) emerging trends in the short-term and mid-term strategy.

### IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

Immediate impacts of the military coup on the CSOs are rampantly damaging all areas: operations and implementation, strategic level decision making, failure to safeguard the CSOs, financial flows and donor relations.

**Impact #1:** *Almost all operations and implementations by local CSOs have got to stand still for an unforeseeable future.*

After the military coup, many CSOs suspended all their operations and implementations for the unforeseeable future.



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The coup destabilised the political institutions in which CSOs operate.

Government agencies such as ministries and departments, and the legislative institutions, including national and subnational level parliaments and elected members, became out of contact. Therefore, most of the activities of the CSOs became irrelevant. For instance, the policy advocacy works of local CSOs were disrupted when military-appointed persons have occupied different places of the policy mechanisms.

The organisations working on the local governance stopped their function due to the uncertain future of local governance under the military regime. The projects in areas once relatively stable and calm places to operate turned into hostile areas where agreed project implementations become difficult because of the military's tight security control and arising intense conflicts. Those local CSOs, consulting with their donors or intermediary organisations, realign their projects into possible alternatives. Not only at the operations and implementation level but the strategic level decision makings were affected. One respondent noted:




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During the Covid-19 outbreak, we made some structural changes in our organisation. Project activities, for the most part, had been adjusted. Our organisational strategy was untouched then. However, the military coup completely turns our strategy around and forced us to look for alternatives.

*(Quoted from Interview with Founder & Executive Director, 35 years, Female)*

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**Impact #2:** *The rule of law fails to safeguard the existence and operations of CSOs. Offices and staff members had to relocate for security reasons.*

The military coup ended the constitutional guarantee on the freedom of association, assembly, and speech. As the military chief holds the total sovereign power, the institutional checks and balances disappeared.

CSOs enjoy no more constitutional protections, whereas anyone involving in organisational functions and activities may face arbitrary arrest. Because there were upsetting cases of organisations that had refused to follow the military's regulations, many local CSOs finds it difficult to continue their operations.

Such a failure in the rule of law system produces the risks and threats of getting black-listed, dissolved, or arrested not only among the CSOs but also among their members individually. Since some staff members decided to support civil resistance movements, they had to relocate their offices and personal residences.

Reflecting on these circumstances, one respondent notes:

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It is challenging for both local and international organisations to survive. Even after removing our organisation's signboard for safety, staying alert day or night proves that civic space is shrinking.

*(Quoted from Interview with Co-Founder & Executive Director, 50s years, Male)*

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**Impact #3:** *The banking crisis disrupted the financial flows of local civil society too.*

In the morning of the military takeover, telecommunication and internet blackouts caused many banking transactions to freeze. Under the instruction and pressures of the military, financial flow across the country gets constricted. Consequently, many professional employees in the private banking sector collectively participated in CDM. With mounting worries and shrinking trust over the banking sector, the impact strikes from big businesses to small households; not an exception for civil society.

Since most of them do not have resources and networking to financially sustain, constricted financial flow, both to and from CSOs, in both the institutional and individual level badly hits numerous local CSOs.



In addition, there are incidences in which INGOs such as Open Society Foundation Myanmar, Asia Foundation, and The International Foundation for Electoral Systems have become the hotspot of the military's target due to their works in governance reform and electoral reform. Open Society Foundation Myanmar is a case in point. The military has also launched investigations into the finances of local CSOs such as Daw Khin Kyi Foundation (The Irrawaddy, 2021) and Free Funeral Service Society (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

Bank transactions for civic engagement activities are at the risk of getting more scrutinised and even freeze unconditionally. The local CSOs which receive funding from these INGOs immediately suspended all operations and activities concerning the potential security threats.



One respondent shared his/her experience:

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Beyond the current project, we will implement only specific small-sized, short-termed projects, just like in 2012. When a donor wants to contribute financially, banks demand strict requirements. Such as it requires approval from the social welfare ministry, which was unrealistic by the time.

*(Quoted from Interview with an Executive Director, 30s years, LGBT)*

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***Impact #4: Dynamic donor relations become an urgent consideration for local organisations.***

Whilst financial flow has been an evident impact, local organisations have struggled to conduct donor relations urgently. Most local CSOs communicate with their donors through intermediary organisations; thus, the accurate information is suspected to be heard for making timely, reflective, and accountable decisions related to financial and accountability issues.

Because of the ever-changing situations, local organisations require a timely and clear response from donors or intermediary organisations about existing and future

coordination. When their communication for donor relations fails to get timely or clear responses, local organisations face concerns about activity and financial projection.

For instance, some organisations face pressure from their funding partners to strictly continue their agreed deliveries, although they acknowledge risks. Such conflict of interests between local and intermediary organisations develops around project closure in a few cases. A respondent remark:

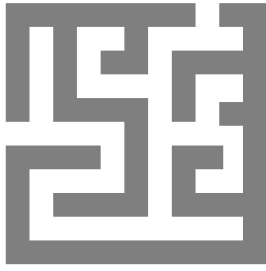
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Certain capacity-building activities sound irrelevant when the political context changes and all are in a revolution mood. Since redesigning our projects is underway, we want dynamic consultations and timely responses from partners and donors.

*(Quoted from Interview with an Executive Director, 40s years, Female)*

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## POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

With arising challenges institutionally and financially, local CSOs are yet to find the coping mechanisms to overcome.

Challenges are no new to Myanmar's local CSOs contributing to the quality of life and a better future for the people under the quasi-military rule. Almost all research participants agreed that deep-rooted challenges became formidable because of the coup. Since this study covers only the insightful voices of available participants in a limited time, it was not easy to count every challenge and describe it extensively. However, those include significant challenges on the legal environment, operations and implementations, financial viability, stakeholder engagement, and accountability.

### ***Challenge #1: LEGAL ENVIRONMENT***

Before the coup, registration of local CSOs has been a voluntary legal procedure to formalise their existence. However, for local CSOs promoting democracy, good governance, civic engagement, public policy, the rule of law, or rights and inclusion of the marginal populations, and so on, staying recognised legally is a dilemma under the junta that refused election results.

Even the Association Registration Law was amended in 2014 after lawmakers consult with stakeholders from civil society, the registration process was not straightforward practically due to arbitrary interpretation and applications. In the registration process, only organisations endorsed by a ministry are allowed to apply. It also requires providing critical information such as personal details of board members and the organisation's income and expenditure. That controversial legal environment for local CSOs poses a challenge for most of the registered organisations after the coup.

Since State Administration Council (SAC) single-handedly amends laws, limit freedoms, and commit human rights violations by justifying the state of emergency, local CSOs in

the long term may face “*State Harassment*”. While SAC has not been endorsed as a de jure government by the wider public or by the international community, local CSOs find it inconvenient to perform and operate within SAC’s acknowledgement and/or permission.

Even though the registered organisations can enjoy certain tax exemptions, they are mandatory to annually report their financial statements, audit reports and updates on the detailed profiles of board members in the organisation. Under a coup, it is questionable to provide such information to SAC for the sake of security for CSOs.

In responding to those shadowing challenges in the legal environment, local CSOs made decisions and choices, generating another set of questions on accountability issues. *(Please see in Challenge #5 ACCOUNTABILITY.)*

#### **Challenge #2: OPERATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATIONS**

Challenges in the legal environment are also influencing the operations and implementations of local organisations. While the rule of law is bleaching across the country, local organisations find it challenging to implement civic engagement activities which require participation and consent from the local public or authorities.

As research participants represent local organisations influencing public policy debates, they commonly revealed challenges with target stakeholders in their advocacy works. Their operations become unfeasible when their target stakeholders, including elected lawmakers, government officials, politicians, are removed, arrested, or warranted and replaced with the military-appointed ones. Instead of influencing key decision-makers, raising public awareness on civic knowledge and democratic institutions by the local CSOs could also face intimidations in the light of breaching the rule of law.

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*As the core activities and projects are suspended or postponed, most organisations have reduced their staff members and struggle to survive by downsizing. On the other hand, some CSO leaders and key actors had fled to remote areas, neighbouring or third countries for security reasons.*

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Even regular constituency mobilising and public relations activities of nonpartisan organisations could be scrutinised and disturbed by the SAC appointed authorities.

As the core activities and projects are suspended or postponed, most organisations have reduced their staff members and struggle to survive by downsizing. On the other hand, some CSO leaders and key actors had fled to remote areas, neighbouring or third countries for security reasons. Those situations on the edge of human resource drain may impact the internal management systems of CSOs. Thus, it needs to re-formulate the strategic plans and operations with available human or financial resources.

### **Challenge #3: FINANCIAL VIABILITY**

The CSOs that are strengthening peace and democracy in Myanmar rely primarily on the financial support of international donors. To ensure the accountability of any CSOs, it is sensible that the CSOs meet the requirements, including the registration under normal circumstances. However, this has become highly contestable after the military staged the coup. On the one hand, the CSOs in Myanmar need the continuous support of international organisations and donors to protect the interests of the Myanmar people. On the other hand, the frame of reference or set(s) of criteria must be adapted to measure the accountability of the CSOs given the changing political context in Myanmar.

The domestically registered CSOs that operated with international financial supports are likely to face challenges if they decide not to extend the registration under the military junta. How can these organisations access international financial supports under such circumstances? How can the rules and regulations be revised to ensure the accountability of CSOs without registration status? These are part of the challenging questions for the domestic CSOs and the partnering international NGOs.

Since the CSOs could not seek funding sources inside Myanmar, they had to rely on international financial supports.

The failure to seek diversification of resources and the lack of strategic fundraising also contribute to such challenges. Given the unstable political circumstances in Myanmar, these challenges make access to financial resources more difficult.

In addition, even though the local CSOs receive financial support from the international organisations, there are issues of rigid funding resources, lacking contingency reserves or flexible expenditure. The CSOs that receive financial support from the international organisation may also face practical obstacles such as a fragile banking system inside Myanmar and newly imposed restrictions on financial transfers. Another challenging area is finding the safe passages and mechanisms that can transfer financial supports and/or other resources to the beneficiaries.

All previous efforts to overcome the lack of access to financial resources fall short after the military coup. The military coup also engenders many further challenges, such as accountability on financial management and transparency of the CSOs.

### ***Challenge #4: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT***

With the gaining momentum of CDM, any cooperation whatsoever can be regarded as collaboration with the military. Even engagement to the military junta, as a stakeholder, can seriously harm the institutional image of the CSOs, especially in the areas of advocacy, because any advocacy effort may lead to the legitimisation of the military junta. If and when the CSOs show approach or gesture towards the military junta, they are likely to face public condemnation for colluding with the military junta.

While many CSOs decided to cut ties with the government stakeholders under the military junta, they cannot openly work with the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar since whatsoever cooperation can jeopardise the organisation's security and that of the individual. Therefore, either in cooperation or stakeholder engagement, the CSOs are facing the dilemma derived from the political circumstances that emerged after the military coup. Such



situations may persist depending on how the political events will unfold in the medium-term or long term.

Nevertheless, the role of independent advocacy organisations fostering public interest in policy-making processes will still be vital. How those organisations will continue their advocacy work may demonstrate: their expertise on specific thematic issues, their innovative approach based on the experience, and how they build their ties, integrity, and influence among the stakeholders. Since this study has not been explored in detail, further exclusive research on those issues will help the public policy advocacy thrive for Myanmar's future.

#### ***Challenge #5: ACCOUNTABILITY***

In the last decade, Myanmar saw numerous local CSOs emerged and operated as watchdogs for accountable governance. There were even debates on the legitimacy, transparency, and accountability of the sector itself in the last couple of years. The backlash of democracy silenced such debates on the civil society sector's multiple dynamic accountabilities and produced challenges instead.

Regarding the accountability of the civil society sector, most of the respected organisations in Myanmar retains through showing transparency on their effective approach, works, and progress before elected government, donors, peers, and the beneficiary populations. However, they have to make every effort to outlast military repression, sometimes at the cost of their transparency.

As part of the willingness to show country-level upward accountability and transparency, registering an organisation requires annual financial and organisational information to be shared before the government agency (as mentioned in Challenge #1 LEGAL ENVIRONMENT).

During the last term of government, many local organisations sought to get domestically registered since international donor organisations have encouraged and set the registration mandatory for partnerships. However, many of those

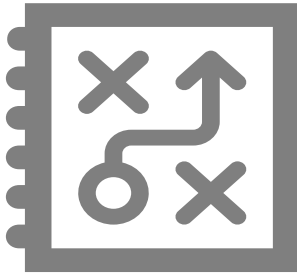
organisations, with an ongoing registration process, have now been suspended. Most research participants from registered organisations have also decided not to extend their registration and not submit required organisational documents annually. The military coup has undermined a good practice for accountability and transparency endeavoured by international partners and local CSOs.

On the other hand, the local organisations acknowledge that they could not become a credible actor with established accountability without fully informing stakeholders, including the state, partner and fellow organisations, and the population at large.

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*The military coup has undermined a good practice for accountability and transparency endeavoured by international partners and local CSOs.*

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## EMERGING TRENDS

It is an inevitable necessity for local CSOs to serve their constituencies in such a time of crisis.

Nevertheless, it seems still vague whether to focus on as the current situation demands different priorities.

At least, the local actors considered short-term and mid-term changes in their approaches until the impacts and challenges they face are resolved or overcome. It is not always easy to assume that all their approaches are strategic. Nonetheless, organisational strategy in many CSOs has become an issue to reconsider and realign for the current situations. Other than their approved strategic missions and existing projects, most organisations decided to work in low profile, sometimes in individual approaches, responding to emergency demands with available resources. A respondent remarks as follow:

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Indeed, most local CSO leaders believe in democratic norms, values, and practices, even in their blood. However, they were caught in the activity trap and distracted from the realities of the society they serve. Very often, they could not weigh the people's political awareness. They even thought that democracy has well-rooted.

In the wake of such a military coup, all local CSO leaders must reflect on the realities of Myanmar society. They must be in solidarity with the people. Most importantly, all their strategic actions should be consistent with local politics.

*(Quoted from Interview with an Executive Director, 30s years, male)*

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As far as we listened to such insights and decisions, these are the visible trends local organisations lean towards:

### **TREND #1: POLICY ADVOCACY TO PUBLIC AWARENESS**

Local organisations, actively advocating for public policies, wish to withstand their expertise, but not with the legitimately questionable SAC. They, thus, look for ways to continue in the public awareness approach because they believe in the

importance of raising awareness, skills and values for nation-building and defending democracy. These advocacy groups tend to reorient their strategic vision or approaches and must convince the international community to remain in those areas.

***TREND #2: REVISING STAKEHOLDERS***

The advocacy groups with continuous research activities mostly assume that SAC will not consider their inputs. They are more likely to advocate pro-democratic groups, including NUG; otherwise, they are in wait-and-see condition. Moreover, they try to include the international community as one of the target audiences, recognising that international pressure yields (in)direct coercion for political changes back on the track to democracy.

***TREND #3: (MORE) HUMANITARIAN THAN DEVELOPMENT***

There are also cases where international partners invited their local organisations to deliver humanitarian assistance. Thus, some rights-based organisations have changed their services into humanitarian assistance delivery.

Amongst such ad-hoc sector shifts, some local CSOs provide small-scaled, urgent humanitarian aids for public service employees and families of the fallen heroes. Besides such humanitarian aids, livelihood support, public awareness-raising and civic engagement activities through local networks are likely to be “sweet-spots”. Anyhow, many organisations stepped into the humanitarian sector while still wish to maintain their role in the development sector.

***TREND #4: DOWNSIZING, RELOCATION OR LESS VISIBILITY***

Meanwhile, discussions with funding partners are ongoing and concrete designs are yet to be made; some local CSOs downsized their organisation as a mid-term solution to survive a bit longer. Until freedom of expression and associations are not ensured enough, most advocacy organisations are believed to move forward with possible alternatives such as

less visible activities with lower security concerns and sensitivity.

When local organisations respond to the unfolding crisis differently, some think of utilising digital and online platforms for their operations and activities. Some consider working from border areas but are still reluctant to be relocated.



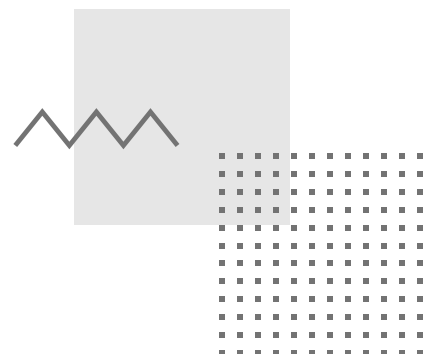
## RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community needs not only to focus on the coup's impacts – i.e., the humanitarian and socio-economic fallout. It is also essential to continue investing in organisational development and sustainability of local organisations, which are striving to deal with the root cause – i.e., the political situation.

This section focuses on some critical recommendations developed from the arguments among the participants. Each recommendation below is believed to be a ground for standing in solidarity with Myanmar's people and civil society.

### **A. FORMULATE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE CHANGING TIMES.**

In the last decade, local CSOs in Myanmar are on the front line in providing social services, promoting human





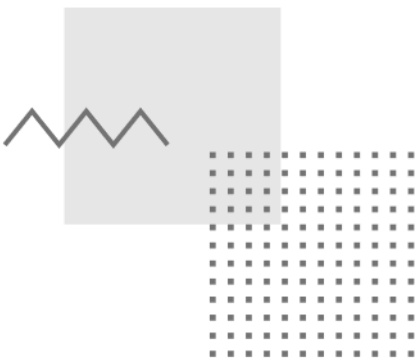
rights, democracy and good governance, and shaping policies and sustainable development. When democratic institutions and the rule of law become threatened these days, local CSOs were the first to witness impacts and hardship and the key actors to find ways to contribute to constructive interventions and open peaceful participation means for active citizens.

To keep civil society in Myanmar alive with continued coordination, formulating comprehensive strategies is essential for all stakeholders involving:

- **Consult with local civil society organisations.**  
From the inception of a theory of change to finalising a comprehensive strategy, close consulting with local CSOs is vital. Facilitating, updating, and consultations with local actors will produce clear and transparent outlines for supporting civil society and contribute to predictable, relevant, and effective support and partnerships.
- **Listen to CSO accountability advocates and political actors.**  
Reaching out to CSO accountability advocates and political actors is indispensable in listening to their different perspectives on the comprehensive strategy for the changing times. Understanding their perspectives will rationalise the theory of change; smoothen implementations and adaptations, and convey achievable and realistic goals for the strategy.

## **B. MAKE FLEXIBLE, LONG-TERM, (AND SUFFICIENT) FINANCIAL SUPPORTS AVAILABLE.**

For a long time, most of the local CSOs in Myanmar operates on rigid and short-termed project fundings rather than flexible and long-term financial supports to be invested in organisational development and sustainability. However, after the coup, the changing demands of the local constituencies challenge local CSOs to initiate their strategic priorities and approaches.



It is the most suitable time for the international partners and organisations to make un-earmarked financial supports available for their local partners in a flexible and long-term fashion, i.e., showing their respect and commitment to independence and local ownership of their partners. It also requires responsiveness in providing such supports and coordination.

- **Support and coordinate responsively.**

In the mid of rapid changes, new challenges and possible risks, responsive support and coordination are necessarily unavoidable. International and local partners must find a balance of responsive support and coordination — by taking calculated risks and establishing mutual accountability — until a future when shared and comprehensive strategic approaches are developed.

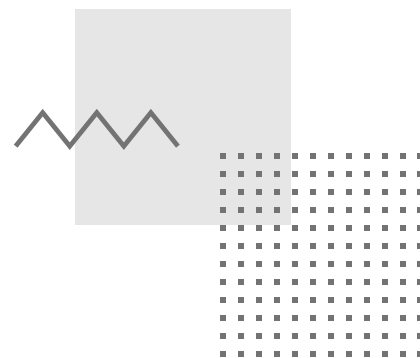
### C. **STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH MYANMAR'S ONGOING AND NOW LONGER-TERM STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY.**

Coups have no space in the modern world, said Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of United Nations on 22<sup>nd</sup> February. Myanmar's struggle for democracy has become part of the global movement for defending democracy where international solidarity work and cooperation are essential.

Standing in solidarity with the civil society in Myanmar requires stronger bonds and unity between local and international partners together in driving a democratic change. It needs more coordinated and harmonised support mechanisms to strengthen local ownership and effectiveness. Some fundamental steps are discussed below for consideration:

- **Recognise the role of local actors.**

At times, international experts and organisations prepared backpacks to return to their safe homes. As for actors in local CSOs, they had to remain unprotected but passionately continuing their



missions and serve their beneficiaries. They analyse their situation within their capacities and resources and speak out for rights and justice to make every possible progress. Considering local ownership for them is one of the most critical steps in recognising their role.

- **Address local actor's capacity issues as needed.**

In a fragile environment, local CSO's human, organisational, structural and material capacities define how these organisations play their roles effectively. The modest investment in organisational development and sustainability creates limitations in strengthening, adapting and maintaining the capacity of local organisations over time. Such limitations in those capacities should be aligned and adequately facilitated to unleash their contribution to Myanmar's positive changes.

- **Provide local partners with fair and equitable power and resources.**

While international and local organisations are tackling challenges and striving for global goals together, they differ in access to resources, authority and legitimacy, which forges them into conventional donor-recipient relationships. To help reduce such imbalances, acknowledging disproportionate funding distribution globally, international partners should explore ways to ensure fair and equitable power and resources for their local partners delivering accountable and effective performance.

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